Sunday, February 18, 1979
TEMPTATIONS OF RELIGION (No. 1 in a Series: The Lust for Certitude)
Matthew 11:2-6

How can I be absolutely sure I'm really in love and that the person I play to marry is the right person for me? Is there any way I can be completely certain that I've chosen the right vocation? Did I choose the right college or university for my education? How can I be certain that God exists? Is there anything in the world that I can truly count on? Such questions are being asked all the time.

We all have a desire for certitude. It comes from good motivations. We want to base our lives on solid foundations. We'd like to be sure that what we believe is correct. We want to be sure that a person we've chosen to believe in and follow will not mislead us.

When John the Baptist was in prison, he began to have doubts as to whether or not Jesus Christ was God's chosen one. John had been his advance agent. Now he was having second thoughts. "Have I been mistaken?" "Have I put my faith in the wrong person?" In an attempt to quiet his doubts, John sent some of his followers to ask Jesus again, "Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?"

It was an honest question. It is only when our desire for certitude turns into a lust that we get into trouble. When a person begins to lust for certitude, it is no longer a genuinely religious pursuit, but a temptation of religion, a temptation which can corrupt our faith. It is corrupting because the lust for certitude can lead to idolatry.

In the Old Testament, Moses was away for a time on the mountain seeking God. While he was gone, the people began to complain. They didn't like the uncertainty of it all. Not only was Moses absent, but God seemed distant as well. They wanted something they could count on, something that would always be the same. Thus, they convinced Aaron to fashion them a golden calf which they could worship and make the center of their lives.

Like the people in the Old Testament, our lust for certitude can get us into trouble. Sometimes it can cause us to misuse the Bible. In our lust for certitude, we want to make it into a visible external authority, an answer book without error. In so doing we make it something it was never meant to be and worse still we distort the message of the Bible as well.

To give a crude example; the attempt to reconcile the creation stories in the Book of Genesis with some of the modern theories of creation proposed by scientific theory by interpreting the six days as geological periods, exchanges the religious meaning of the Biblical narrative for a pottage of pseudo-facts.

Yet the continuing controversies about the truth of the Bible show how widespread among believers is the lust for certitude. Biblical literalism reveals a refusal to live with uncertainty.

To take the Bible seriously, but not literally, is not to discount its importance as the foundational document on which the church stands, but it does remove the idolatrous authority with which the words are sometimes stamped.

Here's an image that has been of great help to me. Think of the Bible as a lamp rather than a mirror. A mirror reflects reality as it is and that kind of assertion underscores Biblical literalism.

In contract, a map gives light; it is directional; it illuminates as well as it causes shadows. What we see and how we see it depends on where the lamp is located. And different people point the light in different directions. Thus, the Biblical writers were expressing the reality illuminated by their own interests and dispositions. The Apostle Paul used another metaphor, he said, “We have this treasure in earthen vessels.” The lust for certitude tends to make the treasure and the vessel the same.

2. Secondly, the lust for certitude causes some people to join religious cults which promise to take away all uncertainty. Cults like the “People’s Temple” recently so much in the news are an extreme example of what the lust for certitude can do.

Throughout history it has been a fact that we human beings have difficulty handling freedom and the uncertainty that goes with freedom. There are those among us who will quickly and even gladly give up their freedom for security of body and mind and for certainty about what to believe.

In Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s book, THE BROTHERS KARAMOZOV, the Grand Inquisitor chides Jesus for not seeing this: “I tell thee that man is tormented by no greater anxiety than to find someone quickly to whom he can hand over his gift of freedom with which the ill-fated creature was born.”

Cults promise a way of life which will do away with uncertainty and freedom. Thus, some people join cults to attempt to satisfy their longing for community, for a loving, caring group that will never fail them. It’s a way of trying to deal with loneliness and boredom. It’s a need for the certainty that someone will always be there.

This extreme longing for a loving community without discord and where everything is planned and taken care of can be satisfied for a time at least within a religious compound which seems secure from the dangers of the outside world.

But this too becomes a form of idolatry. The fact is that no friend, no lover, no group, no community or commune, no family, will be able to put completely to rest our deepest cravings for unity and wholeness. To attempt to find a place where no pain exists, no separation is felt, no discord appears, where all human relationships are perfect and where there is no uncertainty, is to live in a dream world. The cult in attempting to provide the solution to uncertainty and loneliness demands our complete loyalty to it and its leader rather than pointing to God. The cult becomes the idol.

Religious cults are also particularly appealing as an answer to the lust for certitude because a cult usually has a living charismatic leader who says he or she has been given new, exclusive revelations about God and the world. Here is total certainty. Anyone who does not believe the leader’s teachings is not only wrong, but on the side of Satan.

The danger of any cult then is its tendence towards idolatry, the impulse to make it appear more than it is and to promise a kind of total certainty which is not attainable in this world. To want a way around doubt and dread and death and uncertainty is part of our human condition. To claim to have that way totally and to promise it to people in exchange for their freedom is blasphemy and a corruption of true religion.

Furthermore, the religious leader who claims to be all-knowing and all-wise, so profoundly at one with truth that he or she can be obeyed without question, is in as much danger as his or

her followers. From the exercise of charisma to the belief in one's own publicity is one short step that moves toward the drunkenness of power and dominion over people's lives. Finally, the leader cannot tolerate the level of worship he or she asks for and receives.

If then the lust for certitude is a corruption of faith, how do we as Christians deal with the uncertainties of life?

1. First, we can remember that uncertainty is built into all of life. Even in our ordinary everyday existence there is little that is truly certain. Remember the old cliché — "Nothing is certain except death and taxes."

As far as our religious faith is concerned, the lack of certitude about the nature of God may actually represent a healthy respect for the dangers of substituting human forms for Holy Substance. God can never be totally described or experienced. There is always more to God than we can see or know. All of our attempts at description and certainty are inadequate.

2. Secondly, resisting the lust for certitude keeps us open to new knowledge and new experience. As people in the Reformed tradition of the Christian faith, we believe that God's truth is continually breaking forth.

On the other hand, the lust for certitude can blind us to new knowledge. I've mentioned before in a previous sermon that when Galileo showed his telescope to the leading sages of his day, the response generally fell into three categories. Some people were properly struck by what they saw and were not afraid to begin to see the world differently.

They were not afraid of the uncertainty and change which new knowledge often brings. They did not possess the lust for certitude which prevented them from considering other points of view. A second group peered around at the other end of the telescope convinced that Galileo had pasted something on the glass. They were certain of their present knowledge and thought that anything which conflicted with it had to be false. The third group refused even to look through the lens. They didn't want to see anything which might cause them to reexamine the certitude on which they thought their lives depended. That's how frightened they were of any uncertainty. Better to stay with their present beliefs.

3. Thirdly, when John the Baptist sent his disciples to visit Jesus because he was uncertain about who Jesus was, remember how Jesus answered. He said, "God and tell John was you hear and see — the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear and the dead are raised up and the poor have good news preached to them."

Jesus was implying that the way to deal with uncertainty is to be open to the activity of God that is present in the world even though that activity doesn't always fit our preconceived notions of what we think God is doing. Jesus was also implying to John that there was no way in which he could absolutely proved beyond the shadow of a doubt that he was the Messiah. Faith in the last analysis is a basic trust in reality that goes beyond facts or proof, it is also an openness to mystery. Faith acknowledges the fact that we cannot know it all — that we can never be completely certain.

All this is very different from the claim that religion provides us with a set of absolute certainties concerning God, human beings and the universe. An insistence upon absolute certitude misconceives religion and distorts it. Religion is a search for meaning, rather than a certitude.

Even the scientific enterprise, dependent as it is upon empirical verification would come to a halt if scientists insisted upon nothing less than certitude before proceeding further. Scientific knowledge would include little if limited to certainties; it is made up of probabilities, approximations and hypotheses. The true scientist is seeking to understand rather than to be certain. The assurance that he or she is on the right track arises from a growing interpretation and understanding of the data.

Religion flourishes best too, not when we are carefully weighing degrees of certitude and when religious authorities are insisting upon infallibility or inerrancy, but when we are concerned with understanding our faith in relation to the happenings of everyday life and when we are not afraid of some uncertainty and doubt.

Remember, faith in the Christian sense is not simply personal self-assurance or the warding off of feelings of God. In that way faith and love are quite similar. Love is always more than rational reflection and the marshalling of facts in order to prove the certainty of love. The basic assurance of not being deceived in a loving relationship is found in the relationship itself, not in argumentation or some other kind of supposed proof. The same is true with faith. Its basic certitude cannot be directly achieved by appeal to reason or authority or infallibility or a lot of facts; it comes from a living out of the self-transcending relationship with God and with others. Faith, like love, always involves an element of risk. The lust for certitude seeks to do away with any risk, and that is not finally possible.
Amen.